

# Ehrlich and Miller unlikely partners

Democratic Senate chief  
helps governor on agenda

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As Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. pushes his agenda through the final days of the legislature, the state's new Republican chief executive is relying on an unlikely ally in one of Maryland's top Democrats — Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller.

With Miller's support, such proposals as the governor's slot machine gambling legislation are staying alive despite growing opposition in the Senate and the House of Delegates.

And without Miller's backing, other Ehrlich priorities have ended in defeat, such as the nomination of Lynn Y. Buhl, the governor's choice for environmental secretary, who was rejected by the Senate last week.

"When Mike Miller pulls the trigger, someone is going to get shot," said Del. Alfred W. Redmer Jr., a Baltimore County Republican and House minority leader. "And in this instance, it was Lynn Buhl and Bob Ehrlich. That is a fact.

of political life in Annapolis."

With a new governor, a new speaker of the House of Delegates and significant turnover throughout the legislature, Miller — whose 28 years in the Senate include tenure as the longest-serving president — has emerged as perhaps the most pivotal figure in this year's General Assembly session.

He has juggled the concerns of his party, which makes up the majority of the legislature, with those of a Republican governor at a time of fiscal crisis and change in the state.

For Ehrlich, Miller's role is critical. Dozens of Ehrlich's appointments, including his top Cabinet posts, have had to be

confirmed by the Senate, and the governor's leading legislative proposal — slot machine gambling — is riding on Miller's power and influence.

"We have been operating very well together," Ehrlich said. "I know it's been very shocking to the press and others. But he made it very clear to me in my transition period ... that he will work cooperatively with us.

"Obviously, we had a hiccup this week," said Ehrlich, calling the Buhl decision partisan politics.

## Drawings lines

The 60-year-old Miller, whose curly hair is tinged with streaks of blond as well as gray, has served as Senate president since 1987. He said he tries to be a consensus builder, but he had to draw the line with the Buhl nomination.

Ehrlich "was insisting that Lynn Buhl, with her very poor and checkered record ... that she be the secretary for the environment," Miller said. "There's got to be a win-win on both sides. There was none of that on the governor's side."

The senator, whose district spans Calvert and Prince George's counties, is widely viewed as a master politician. But his decisions often have led to contentious relations with senators, Democrats and others across the state.

That has, at times, made him a target.

In 2000, former Sen. Thomas L. Bromwell tried to oust Miller as president while some lawmakers complained about the distribution of committee chairmanships and other assignments, including a lack of positions for African-Americans.

But Bromwell backed away from the coup attempt and mended fences with Miller.

## Name on the building

A year later, Miller secured his place in state history with a new \$24 million Senate office building dedicated in his honor.

"You respect the person who has survived the number of years he has served," said Isiah Leggett, chairman of the Maryland Democratic Party. "As I travel around the state, there's a great, great deal of respect for him. It's no accident his name is on the Senate building."

Then, last year, some thought Miller's career was again in jeopardy.

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"We thought it was a real possibility that he wasn't coming back because of his health," said Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, the Senate majority leader and an East Baltimore Democrat.

Miller's knees had been causing him pain, but knee surgery revitalized him.

Yet Miller's journey faced new hurdles from political enemies. Then-candidate Michael S. Steele, now the lieutenant governor, criticized Miller during the campaign for what Steele viewed as an attempt to influence the state's highest court over last year's legislative redistricting plan.

As a result, Miller found himself before the Assembly's ethics committee, answering questions about whether he orchestrated an attempt to influence the Maryland Court of Appeals by calling judges as they considered lawsuits against the state's legislative redistricting plan.

Miller received a reprimand by the legislature's Joint Committee on Legislative Ethics, saying he had "abused his position" by calling the judges.

The court later declared the state's plan unconstitutional and drew its own map. The new plan cost several top Democrats re-election, including House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. and two of Miller's lieutenants — former Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman and former Sen. Walter Baker, both of them committee chairs.

The losses of Hoffman and Baker couldn't have come at a worse time for Miller. In the same year, his two other chairmen, Bromwell and Sen. Clarence W. Blount, retired.

### **More into the game**

Instead of losing political muscle with the departures of his strongest Senate backers, Miller became more of a player.

"With this huge turnover and all of the other dynamics, he's getting much more involved," said Laurence Levitan, a lobbyist and former head of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee. "He never got involved in the budget in the past."

Added McFadden: "I've never seen Mike Miller work so hard as he has this year."

Miller has never been known for a particular political agenda,

and he usually leaves his chairmen alone to run their committees. But this is a unique year that has called for unusual approaches, including helping ensure — for the sake of the state — that the Republican administration is successful.

In the Buhl case, Miller says, he voted against her to protect the state's natural resources.

Ehrlich said the Buhl decision violated the usual protocol in Annapolis of backing the governor's choice of staff. "The strong tradition is the executive should have great discretion in picking his Cabinet," Ehrlich said, "... It was exposed as a political episode. It was about politics."

Some Democrats, such as Hoffman, agree. "I think what happened with Lynn Buhl was Mike Miller giving the left wing of the legislature a piece of the action," she said. "It seemed to me that using your muscle to eliminate a nominee was not a good idea."

### **Backing slots**

But wherever he can support the governor, Miller has said throughout the 90-day legislative session, he will do so, without partisan politics.

That could mean Ehrlich's slots proposal, which has come under fire during the past couple of weeks because, critics say, recent amendments have moved the legislation too far in favor of the horse racing industry.

Miller, the son of a public school teacher, said slots are necessary to help support the state's education system. But he and others have said that the administration has hurt the legislation with poor decisions, calling the governor's staff "a band of wandering gypsies."

With the House pushing for the slots legislation to be studied rather than passed immediately, most lawmakers say the fate of the governor's leading proposal rests in the hands of the Senate president.

Said Sen. Brian E. Frosh, a Montgomery County Democrat, "The only reason they're still in the game is because of Mike Miller."

*Sun staff writer Tim Craig contributed to this article.*